

EPA will relent, warn public about asbestos in insulation

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Amid continued debate, the federal government appears ready to warn millions of home and business owners about the dangers of potentially lethal asbestos-contaminated insulation in their walls and attics.

After almost two years of first ignoring and then playing down the risk from vermiculite insulation, called Zonolite, the Environmental Protection Agency said it would launch a nationwide consumer information program.

"This will be a major announcement," David Cohen, a senior EPA spokesman, said. "We're planning to go all out just as we did for radon and asbestos in schools and other major toxic problems.

"It looks like this will go beyond just having the warning prominently displayed on EPA's Web site. There could be news conferences, press releases and pamphlets distributed in hardware and home improvement stores."

Cohen said the announcement could be within three or four weeks. But he's not sure what it will say beyond warning people not to touch Zonolite insulation in their homes for fear of sending asbestos fibers into the air.

"The science needs to be done to prove whether or not this product is dangerous, but I'm sure the message we'll convey to the public will be like the card on a hotel room door - 'Do Not Disturb,'" Cohen said.

A heated argument continues at EPA headquarters, with some in the agency's science and program sections demanding that additional testing be undertaken.

In December, the Post-Dispatch reported that the EPA was ready to warn the public three times last year as part of a declaration of a public health emergency in the Montana town of Libby. Hundreds of miners and their family members have been sickened or killed by asbestos in the vermiculite ore that came from a W.R. Grace mine. The White House Office of Management and Budget convinced the agency not to make the emergency declaration, and the warning to an estimated 35 million homeowners never came about.

Congress voices concerns

The EPA's agreement to make the public announcement came after an increase in pressure from members of Congress.

On Feb. 6, Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., made a speech on the Senate floor denouncing EPA lethargy in warning the public of the hazards from the insulation made from asbestos-tainted vermiculite. Murray also faulted the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health for failing to tell workers the even greater hazards they may face renovating, wiring or stringing telephone or television cables in attics.

Murray told her Senate colleagues that the reason that she's so concerned about the cancer-causing vermiculite is that residents in her state and every other state are being exposed to asbestos from Zonolite. The EPA and other federal agencies estimate that as many as 35 million homes and businesses contain the material.

"I am deeply concerned that most people with Zonolite in their homes are completely unaware of this problem," Murray said. "I am afraid most will not learn of it until they have already been exposed to dangerous levels of asbestos."

Dr. Gregory Wagner, director of the Division of Respiratory Disease Studies for the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, said his agency didn't release its warning to workers because they were waiting for the result of the EPA's studies.

"We had expected it was going to come in first last summer, then last fall and then this winter," Wagner said. "Because of the delays, we're reconsidering the decision to wait further in putting out our fact sheet and are likely to move ahead at this point."

Wagner said the notice should be released within the next few weeks.

The report Wagner was waiting for was a study by Versar, an EPA contractor that has been doing studies on Zonolite since 1985.

The recent study was begun in 2001 and ended up with the testing of six homes in Vermont that had Zonolite in their attics. Neither Wagner nor any of the EPA's emergency response or

asbestos teams in its regional offices have seen the report. However, the agency did give a copy to W.R. Grace.

The study shows that low levels of asbestos were found in the insulation lying between the rafters. But the levels of cancer-causing fibers sent into the air when the insulation was even gently disturbed was unexpectedly high, to the surprise of many experienced in dealing with asbestos.

Democrats pressure
the EPA, budget office

A week ago, Murray and 10 other congressional Democrats demanded in a letter to EPA Administrator Christie Whitman and Mitch Daniels, director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, that they explain why the public is not being warned of the hazard from Zonolite.

"It is the height of irresponsibility for President Bush to keep quiet when millions of families are at real risk," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois, the ranking Democrat on the House Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection Subcommittee.

"In Illinois and across the country, families are facing health hazards at home and at work from asbestos exposure. The American people deserve to have all the information they can to keep their families safe," said the Chicago-area lawmaker.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler of New York added: "It is completely outrageous that the agency charged with protecting the public health keeps important information on this behind a veil of secrecy, from coast to coast." The New York City Democrat has been battling the EPA over what he sees as a cover-up of contaminants released from the World Trade Center collapse.

"For EPA now to decide that millions of people have no right to know what's contained in this material, it is malfeasance of the highest degree," Nadler said.

Whitman says
more study is needed

According to EPA Administrator Whitman, more study is needed before the notification is made.

"We need to have the scientific data to go out with something," Whitman told reporter Steve Wilson of WXYZ-TV in Detroit earlier this month.

"We are doing aggressive scientific additional studies to see what it takes, where the threat matrix is, and how far we need to go in warning people about what they do," said Whitman, who

added, "We don't know it to be a danger."

The White House Office of Management and Budget said it didn't get involved with any plans for a public notification because the EPA told the budget office that "it lacked the scientific proof" of the health dangers from Zonolite.

Marcus Peacock, the budget office's associate director for natural resources, said Thursday that the EPA never "really raised" the issue of notifying the public outside of Libby.

"There was no scientific evidence that this was really an emergency," Peacock said, adding that the EPA told him that the amount of asbestos in the insulation "was so small that it wasn't a significant problem."

"The folks in EPA ... didn't even know how many homes around the country were at risk," Peacock said. "EPA never recommended that they go ahead with an emergency notification, and so we never rejected that."

Peacock said he has heard nothing about the EPA's new plans to notify the public.

"We'll certainly review it and take a look at it. But we certainly would want to see the scientific proof," Peacock said.

EPA's Libby team
has no doubt

Those in the EPA involved with protecting the people in Libby and with the extensive research that has been done on the tremolite asbestos which contaminates the vermiculite, challenge their headquarters' assertion that there is no scientific proof of the danger of Zonolite.

Dr. Aubrey Miller is a toxicologist and the senior medical officer for EPA Region 8 and has been part of the team assessing dangers in Libby since the EPA arrived in November 1999.

Every time he sees Joelle, his 4-year-old daughter, he says he thinks of children throughout the country who could be exposed to Zonolite.

"It is unconscionable that kids could be routinely playing with this stuff up in enclosed nonventilated attic spaces, where the airborne asbestos concentrations can be extremely high and stay that way for many hours after disturbance," Miller said. "We need to be especially concerned about kids due to the long time they will have to manifest disease from their early childhood exposures."

The physician said he doesn't know why EPA headquarters is demanding more studies.

"Tests that have been done for over 20 years by everyone from W.R. Grace, to the Canadian military to EPA itself have shown that Zonolite insulation rapidly releases dangerously high levels of airborne asbestos fibers with the most minor disruption," Miller said.

Debating the Versar study

Some at the EPA in Washington say the extensive testing done by Versar didn't prove the danger, even though the amount of fibers released when the insulation was moved was higher than the federal safety standard for workers. Many of those in headquarters choose to ignore those high levels in the air and instead point to the testing of the bulk insulation, which showed levels of asbestos at or below the 1 percent level, which is the EPA's definition for asbestos-containing material.

Miller and others say the danger must be measured by what becomes airborne.

"The fact that the testing of the bulk samples of the insulation as it lays undisturbed in the attic show low levels or no level of asbestos cannot and should not be construed as not being dangerous," Miller said. "The real test of danger from any asbestos-containing material comes from samples of air collected above the material in the zone where people will be breathing."

Even when Versar wet the insulation in the Vermont testing and took air samples, the numbers of fibers was still above levels the government considers safe for workers.

"These airborne fibers are very hazardous," Miller said. "People must be warned about this."

All sides in the dispute agree that the risk from Zonolite is minimal if the attic is well-sealed, if the material is not leaking into lower floors through cracks and if no one ever comes in contact with the Zonolite or its dust.

"But for those people who go up to their attic more than once a year or their kids are playing up there, or people who are working up there, for them, this is a serious hazard," Miller said.

Chris Weis, another EPA toxicologist who has done extensive studies on Zonolite, added: "The bottom line is that this material is very poisonous when it is inhaled.

"EPA, Grace and many others have shown that disturbing asbestos-contaminated vermiculite causes exposures above short- and long-term federal limits," said Weis. "Residents and workers who are repeatedly exposed to this material are at particularly high risk of lung disease."